

Studies of Learners' Beliefs

— Implications for further studies —

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Abstract

Learner beliefs are one type of individual learner difference. Researchers have investigated their potential effects on learners' strategies and motivation in the classroom, the process of outcomes of learning, and attitude change. By knowing how beliefs change and what variables change learners' beliefs, teachers can create learning experiences that positively influence learners' thoughts and help them develop positive beliefs.

In this paper, I first review belief studies in the field of second language acquisition (SLA). Second, I identify the gaps and suggest implications for future belief studies.

1. Studies of learner beliefs

Research about beliefs is not new in fields such as psychology, but it came late to Applied Linguistics, starting in the mid 1980s. Beliefs are considered one area of individual learner differences that can influence the process and outcomes of second / foreign language learning and acquisition (Cotterall, 1995)¹⁾. Beliefs have been related to mismatches

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between teachers' and learners' agendas in the classroom, students' use of language learning strategies, learner anxiety, and autonomous learning (Kalaja & Barcelos, 2006)²⁾.

Many researchers (e.g., Liao & Chiang, 2003; Mantle-Bromley, 1995)³⁾ have suggested that knowledge of learners' beliefs is one of the elements underlying effective learning and teaching. Descriptions of beliefs can be predictors of the future behaviors of students and they are a key element contributing to individual learner differences in second language (L2) learning (Tanaka & Ellis, 2003, p.63)⁴⁾. Learners are sometimes consciously aware of some of their beliefs, but others are implicit (Kato & Yamaoka, 2000)⁵⁾; thus, they possess both explicit and implicit beliefs. Hosenfeld (2006)⁶⁾ found that journals kept by students learning Spanish provided evidence of the emergence of beliefs. The author explained why some beliefs emerged, why some emerged beliefs were acted upon, and why others were held but not acted upon (p.51). Alexander and Dochy (1995)⁷⁾, however, concluded that even if beliefs remain implicit, they are apt to impact thoughts and actions.

Wenden (1987)⁸⁾ suggested that without knowing learners' beliefs, mismatches can occur between learners and teachers. For example, learners who believe that grammar is the most important aspect for learning foreign languages might employ grammar-centered learning strategies. This belief might lead them to feel negatively about classes lacking a grammatical component; this possibility underscores how important it is for teachers to know learners' beliefs when developing a class syllabus.

After acknowledging students' beliefs, teachers can attempt to modify them. Alexander and Dochy (1995) suggested that change agents of beliefs include education, learning experience, personality, information, and the

nature of the beliefs. Teachers can develop strategies to alter learners' misleading beliefs about learning based on those change agents. Altered beliefs, in turn, can lead learners to more successful learning outcomes. Hashimoto (1993)⁹⁾ stated that modifying learners' beliefs that affect learning can influence the development of learners' strategies.

Richards and Lockhart (1994, p. 52)¹⁰⁾ suggested that learners' belief systems affect many aspects of the learning process, including motivation, learning strategies, and preferences regarding the learning environment. Therefore, by knowing more about their students' belief systems, teachers can better understand student learning behaviors and can help them learn more effectively (Keim, Furuya, Doye, & Carlson, 1996)¹¹⁾.

Students can have mistaken or negative beliefs that can lead to a reliance on relatively ineffective learning strategies, resulting in a negative attitude toward learning and autonomy (Victori & Lockhart, 1995)¹²⁾, or a lack of confidence (Peacock, 1999)¹³⁾. Stevick (1980)¹⁴⁾ indirectly argued for the importance of beliefs when he stated that success depends less on the materials and teaching techniques used in the classroom and more on what goes on inside and between people (p.4).

Modifying learners' beliefs might not directly lead to increases in their foreign language proficiency, but it can help them develop more positive attitudes toward learning the language or heighten the motivation that drives their learning. Changing beliefs, even the simplest beliefs, can have profound effects on learning (Dweck, 2006, p. 1)¹⁵⁾.

Although researchers' interest in beliefs has grown, instruments for investigating the complex nature of learners' beliefs have not been fully developed. The most prominent survey instrument used in earlier studies of learners' beliefs, the Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) (Horowitz, 1987)¹⁶⁾, was designed to sensitize teachers and researchers

to the variety of beliefs held by American students who were learning foreign languages in the United States, and to the possible consequences of specific beliefs for second language learning and instruction. The BALLI was developed to assess students' beliefs about language learning in five major areas: foreign language aptitude, the difficulty of language learning, the nature of language learning, learning and communication strategies, and motivations and expectations. The original BALLI was designed to "assess teacher opinions on a variety of issues and controversies related to language learning" (Horwitz, 1987, p. 334). In a free-recall activity, 25 foreign language teachers in the United States were asked to list their beliefs, other people's beliefs, and their students' beliefs about language learning. Teachers examined the list to add more beliefs they had encountered. Then, the instrument was pilot-tested with 150 foreign language students. Horwitz reported the striking finding that over one third of the students thought that a foreign language could be learned in two years or less by studying only one hour a day and that many students believed that learning a second language primarily involved learning vocabulary or grammatical rules. Those findings led her to conclude that investigating learners' beliefs is important because it leads to a better understanding of their expectations of, commitments to, success in, and satisfaction with foreign language classes.

Horwitz's (1988)¹⁷⁾ descriptive study contributed to studies that followed by presenting (a) one way to make an inventory to investigate learner beliefs, (b) the importance and implications of studying learner beliefs, particularly where students learning a foreign language in their native country is concerned, (c) a pedagogical suggestion for teachers that knowledge of learner beliefs ultimately helps them foster more effective learning strategies in their students, and (d) a foundation that was

expanded into such concepts as learner strategies, learner anxiety, and learner motivation.

Researchers that used questionnaires such as the BALLI (Horwitz, 1987) were considered to be applying normative approach (Barcelos, 2006, p.11)¹⁸⁾, in which types of learners' beliefs about SLA are described and classified (Barcelos, 2006, p. 11). In those quantitative studies of learners' beliefs, researchers conceived of learners' beliefs as preconceived notions and tended to consider learners' beliefs as generally stable (Campbell, Shaw, Plageman, & Allen, 1993; Horwitz, 1987; Hosenfeld, 2006, p. 38; Kuntz, 1996; Mantle-Bromley, 1995)¹⁹⁾. Those studies did not produce a consensus concerning the relationship between beliefs and behaviors and they failed to describe context-bound and dynamic beliefs about foreign language learning adequately because they used only Likert-scale questionnaires and investigated learners' beliefs as stable constructs (Barcelos, 2006; Sakui & Gaies, 1999)²⁰⁾. While belief changes could be identified by administering questionnaires multiple times, such an approach is not ideal for investigating the dynamics of change, such as how easily and under what conditions beliefs change. Thus, in order to investigate emergent beliefs and the processes of belief change and belief ascription (Kramsch, 2006)²¹⁾, a more qualitative approach using naturalistic discourse such as written or spoken texts (Barcelos, 2006, p. 93) or mixed-methods conclude that investigating learners' beliefs is what goes on inside and designs are appropriate.

The need for a qualitative approach was suggested by Keim, Furuya, Doye, and Carlson (1996) after they had used the BALLI to survey the attitudes and beliefs about foreign language learning held by 215 first- and 196 second-year Japanese students taking communicative English courses at a Japanese university. The authors concluded that a more specifically

focused instrument than the BALLI should be used to highlight differences between different groups of students. They also concluded that they could have used a more coordinated approach of triangulating information gathered from systematic classroom observations, survey techniques, and interview and written responses in order to target strategies that were based on beliefs (p. 100). They saw a need to develop an instrument more sensitive to the populations and situations they were investigating.

As a result of a number of critical reviews of the normative approach, two further approaches were developed, the metacognitive approach and the contextual approach (Barcelos, 2006). In the metacognitive approach, beliefs are defined as metacognitive knowledge, which is “the stable, statable, although sometimes incorrect knowledge that learners have acquired about language, learning and the language learning process” (Wenden, 1987, p. 163)²²⁾. Wenden (1999)²³⁾ later acknowledged that metacognitive knowledge might change over time as people mature and their situations change (p. 435). In those cases, researchers can collect verbal data through semi-structured interviews and self-reports in order to investigate the nature of the changes (Victori & Lockhart, 1995; Wenden, 1986, 1987).

Wenden's studies (1986, 1987) were a springboard to other studies of learners' beliefs, attitudes, strategies, and motivations. For example, Yang (1999)²⁴⁾ investigated the relationship between EFL university students' beliefs about language learning and their strategy use with multiple methods. She conducted a survey of 505 Taiwanese university students from five universities using the BALLI, Oxford's (1990)²⁵⁾ Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL), and author-designed questions. The main finding was that the students' beliefs about their ability to learn the foreign language were strongly related to their use of learning strategies,

especially those that promote functional practice such as interacting with native speakers. Yang concluded that teachers should provide more opportunities to students to interact with native speakers, as well as to use English with non-native learners.

Recently, several researchers have used the contextual approach by collecting multiple types of data in order to arrive at a better understanding of beliefs in specific contexts. In general, they have described beliefs as embedded in students' contexts (Barcelos, 2006, p. 19) and they have tended to view learner beliefs as changing and dynamic (Hosenfeld, 2006, p. 39). Those researchers used research methods such as participant observation, semi-structured interviews, open-ended questionnaires (Barcelos, 2000), document analysis, learner diaries, written reports, semi-structured interviews, narratives (Barcelos, 2008), and interviews (Barcelos, 2006). Case studies and narratives have revealed aspects of beliefs that were not reported by previous researchers (Barcelos & Kalaja, 2006, p. 236). For example, Barcelos (2008) collected 53 narratives of Brazilian students and concluded that narratives allowed her to understand the students' experiences, their beliefs about themselves, and places for language learning in Brazil, and to gain a better understanding of the interactions among their previous, present, and future experiences (p. 47). Cotterall's (2008)²⁶ narrative case study of three Japanese adult students revealed how those individuals became independent language learners. In a case study of beliefs and metaphors of a Japanese teacher of English, Sakui and Gaies (2006) found that the participant's professional identity was closely bound up with her effort to recognize and reconcile several competing sets of beliefs and tensions (p. 160).

To sum up, the three approaches have advantages and disadvantages. The normative approach allows researchers to investigate the beliefs of

a large number of participants; however, the participants' responses are restricted to items on the questionnaire. The metacognitive approach allows learners to use their own words and reflect on their language learning, however, learners' beliefs are inferred only from the students' statements. The contextual approach allows researchers to investigate beliefs by listening to the learners and considering their learning contexts; however, it is time-consuming and therefore suitable only with small samples. The choice of approaches ultimately depends on the researcher and research questions.

Within the normative and metacognitive approaches, the implicit assumption seems to be that the students' beliefs do not change significantly. However, within the contextual, alternative approaches, beliefs are described as dynamic and diverse, meaning that beliefs develop and change.

2. Gaps and Implications for Further Studies

The first gap is that the development and change of learners' beliefs have not been sufficiently investigated. Research into beliefs began with Horwitz's (1987) studies using the Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI), which had a ripple effect in the field of foreign language education. A considerable body of research on learners' beliefs followed (e.g., Campbell, Shaw, Plageman, & Allen, 1993; Cotterall, 1995; Hashimoto, 1993; Kuntz, 1996; Sakui & Gaies, 1999; Tanaka & Ellis, 2003; Wenden, 1987). In those studies, learners' beliefs were elicited via questionnaires from the perspective of teaching, or trying to identify the architecture of a stable belief system (Kramsch, 2006, p. 111). In this view, learners hold in mind beliefs that are relatively stable and act upon these beliefs when

they perform tasks during the process of acquiring the foreign language situationally conditioned (Sakui & Gaies, 1999, p. 481). As Benson and Lior (1999, p. 460) observed, it is more valuable to study the construction of learners' beliefs, where their beliefs come from, what effects the beliefs have on the learning process, their functions, and the ways in which they are open to change.

When investigating development and change, the tracing of beliefs over time is crucial. With respect to time, researchers need to investigate learners' past and present beliefs as well as their beliefs about the imaginary future. Learners' preconceived beliefs about language learning that were cultivated in the context of past learning experiences likely affect students' use of learning strategies and their success in learning a second language (Horwitz, 1987, 1988). By the same token, as some researchers (Anderson, 1991)²⁷⁾ have suggested, imagining a future community can affect learners' current learning and beliefs about learning. To date, no studies have shed light on those three phases of constructing learners' beliefs. Many researchers (e.g., Hashimoto, 1993; Sakui & Gaies, 1999; Wenden, 1986a; Wenden, 1986b; Yang, 1999, 2003) have investigated university students' beliefs. Studies targeting students at different levels of education are needed because this can provide pedagogical implications for school goals and objectives, curricula, instruction, and individual learning.

The second gap is that the complex nature and characteristics of learners' beliefs is little understood (Richards, Gallo, & Renandya, 2001, p.56)²⁸⁾. The complexity is illustrated by their defining characteristics: They are dynamic and emergent, socially constructed, contextually situated, experiential, mediated, paradoxical, and contradictory (Kalaja, 2006, p.233). Thus, there is a need to investigate patterns of beliefs, to evaluate their

effects on learning, and to understand where beliefs arise from and how they are developing.

The third gap is that there is still no general consensus about what beneficial beliefs are and how they promote learning, and what interfering beliefs are and how they hinder learning. To date, researchers have been concerned with describing and classifying types of beliefs (Horwitz, 1987), such as beliefs about the difficulty of language learning, the nature of language learning, aptitude for language learning, and learning and communication strategies. Those classifications describe a diversity of beliefs; however, they do not show the relationship between beliefs and language learning. Also, little is still known about the beliefs that lead to successful language learning (Ellis, 1994). White (1999)²⁹⁾ investigated how learners experienced and articulated their experience of a solo distance language learning context and found that tolerance of ambiguity can be seen as related to the learners' particular locus of control. In order to investigate sources of beliefs and the factors that help learners construct, develop, and modify beliefs about learning, researchers should investigate learners' learning contexts, including teachers, peers, parents, and their learning experiences.

The fourth gap is that theoretical explanations of learner beliefs have not been sufficiently investigated. Most studies of learners' beliefs have produced empirical evidence, but theories explaining learner beliefs were rarely proposed. Some researchers, however, have proposed theories regarding how learner beliefs are developed, modified and fixed. Examples include a study investigating agency in language learning histories using attribution theory, students' perceptions of language study using a socioeducational model, and relationships between students' self-efficacy and their use of learning strategies (Yang, 1999). More studies are needed

if we are to better understand how well theories match the empirical data.

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